



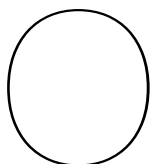
TIMED CITIES

THE CITY DESIGNED FOR ITS PEOPLE

Author: **Sam Shingles**

Timed Cities, such as those being planned for Milan and Paris, are aimed to change the way cities work. The idea is to create a community where all amenities are within walking distance.

Sam Shingles from **THINK** gets in touch with researchers at the University of Malta who are examining what these timed cities would look like in the Maltese Islands.



Over the past couple of years, the global pandemic forced unimaginable changes on how we use and value the spaces we call our homes as well as the cities and towns they reside in.

In a *Times of Malta* article, lawyer Simon Micallef Stafrace (a specialist in traffic issues), spoke about the link between traffic and the pandemic. With more people spending their time indoors, they were more 'aware of the environmental impact that traffic has on their lives'. Whether we want to get our children to school or buy groceries, for many, the only viable option is using a car. Not out of choice, but out of necessity because of limited viable alternatives.

The 'Timed City' concept can make cars less necessary. We got in touch with three researchers at the University of Malta (UM), Dr Thérèse Bajada (Lecturer with the Institute for Climate Change and Sustainable Development), Dr Wendy Jo Mifsud (Lecturer of Spatial Planning &

Infrastructure, Faculty for the Built Environment, UM) and Dr Sarah Scheiber (Assistant Lecturer of Spatial Planning & Infrastructure, Faculty for the Built Environment, UM), to find out more about this idea, what it could mean for the Malta of the future, and how society can start the changes needed.

LA VIDA LOCAL

A Timed City, as Bajada explains, 'refers mainly to reaching a destination within a selected time frame' in the city. The exact time frame for these journeys varies around the world, but commonly commutes are aimed to be '15-30 minutes'. The idea is that this travel uses 'active modes of transport: walking, cycling', and other forms of sustainable travel, rather than using a car. Other definitions of this idea also feature the concept of 'community life and living locally, which implies the idea of buying things from within the neighbourhood, joining the community (especially if there are open green spaces) and getting to know your neighbours, as well as working within that same community'.

The concept of a Timed City started in the 1920s with Clarence Perry, an American urban planner who developed the concept of a 'Neighbourhood Unit'. It promoted a community-centric lifestyle that was hidden away from the ugly factories and noise of the industrial world. This was followed up in the 1960s by Jane Jacobs when the car was beginning to become a common sight. In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs describes 'cities as integrated systems' that 'would change over time



Aerial view of Barcelona Superblocks
Image courtesy of Westend61 / Amazing Aerial

according to how they were used'. She believed strongly in 'the importance of local residents' and was opposed to the 'car-centred approach' within cities. Bajada explains that Jacobs envisioned 'frequent streets, which means moving around slowly within your community, and short blocks, meaning the ability to reach destinations within them by active mobility', or walking and cycling around.

Cities are still being designed for cars rather than people. Urbanized areas still suffer from air pollution and congestion, road accidents, and less active societies. Today the Timed City idea is being re-energised by Carlos Moreno, who is championing the concept of a Timed City or the 15-minute city and the 'return to a local way of life'. As Bajada explains, his concept features 'six essential functions: the living aspects of the community, the working aspect, commerce, healthcare (due to more active lifestyles), better education, and entertainment, with more activities happening in open spaces that encourage people to entertain themselves within the community and to get to know each other.'

SUPERBLOCKS

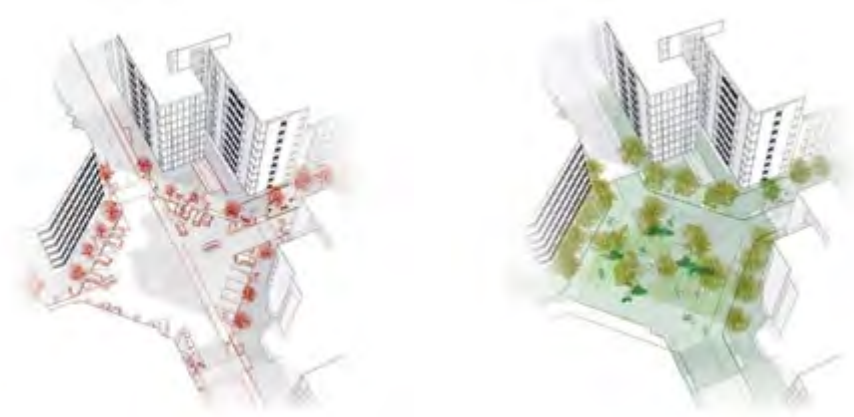
Timed City concepts are taking hold in Seattle, Paris, Melbourne, and other cities worldwide. Barcelona's answer for a more community-driven city was to create what is known as 'Superblocks'. As Scheiber explains, 'currently we expect every street within urban areas to have the same level of access for cars; anybody can pass through them.' The design is also the same throughout, typically with a 'pavement on each side, cars in the middle, and parking on either side'. Instead, the Superblock model, as the name

suggests, groups a series of smaller blocks together. Car access is limited within the inner streets, with 'the main vehicular traffic confined to the outer streets'. This then allows the inner streets to be treated differently 'and create space for people to be able to engage with the community and more green space.' Due to speed restrictions and the design approach, any vehicles coming into the Superblock travel very slowly, and as Scheiber highlights, it allows people to 'take ownership of the space, and so there are other things happening in streets, for example, social activity.'

THE BEATING HEART

These theories of city design all aim to create a city around its people and not their cars. Everything that a community needs is within this 15–30 minute travel window, but as Scheiber explains 'we've become so used to what we see around that maybe we forget that there are alternatives' to this car-based city design. Green recreational spaces and basic facilities should be within reach without needing a car. A city designed with this principle helps children, the elderly, and those with limited mobility. By helping those who cannot drive, a greater community feel develops in a city. This in turn helps provide an innovative solution to tackle climate change and reduce fossil-fuelled cars' environmental impact.

These city-changing ideas need citizen champions. As Mifsud explains, the Superblocks in Barcelona were 'very much people led. People lobbied for this change to happen for several years. People need to fight for the change that they want to see.' This can prompt politicians to 'implement policy and give the go ahead' for the planners to then enact that change. ➔



Ajuntament de Barcelona rendering
Image courtesy of bloomberg.com

THE MALTA OF TOMORROW

But how can these ideas be applied to Malta? A Local Councils' Association initiative, called Slow Streets, supported by the Ministry for National Heritage, Arts and Local Government, Ministry for Transport, Infrastructure and Capital Projects, and Transport Malta, are looking to put similar ideas into practice.


Despite Bajada, Scheiber, and Mifsud having different research backgrounds, all share an interest in exploring what Malta could look like in the future. As Mifsud eloquently describes, 'we come from very different backgrounds, but they're related, because you place the people and the community at the centre. You analyse what is needed, and then you respond to that, whether you respond to it from a transport planning point of view, from a green infrastructure point of view, or from a building of social capital point of view. These are

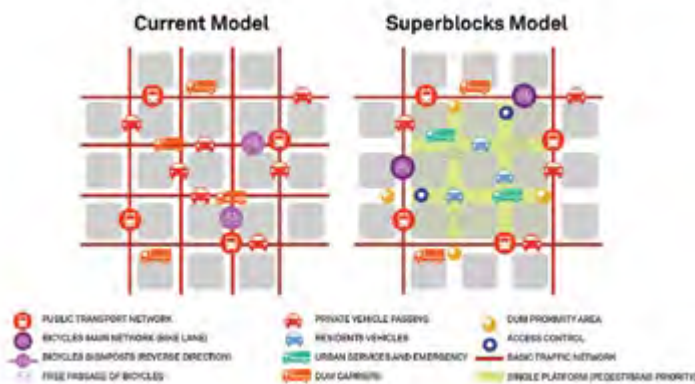
all disciplines which we are experts in individually and which we can apply to creating better spaces.'

The Slow Streets initiative aims to have temporary removal of cars from village cores. They encourage more community involvement and more people actively moving around their village. Bajada informs us that 48 local councils have signed up out of a possible 69, and some are starting to actually implement the idea. Ideas such as Superblocks might also provide an interesting solution for an island like Malta because it doesn't involve building new structures, just re-organising and re-imagining the space that is already there.

You could plan Malta as one whole city. As Scheiber puts it, 'we have our different localities, but it works as a city, with a main urban centre or maybe a couple.' In Malta, Scheiber suggests that we need to study whether the Timed City concept should be applied

to each individual town centre or to two or three key urban centres or maybe both in parallel. With this method, 'we can start to reclaim our centres as they used to be, still send our children to buy food or meet up with friends at local recreational spaces.' However, what might work in one place might not work elsewhere both on the local and global level, hence why the discussion needs to begin around what people want Malta to be like.

There isn't a one-size-fits-all approach. Each community and each member within it has their own needs, which have to be addressed. They must speak up about what they value most about the places they live so those creating new policies and designs can understand these values. As Mifsud reiterates, 'two years or more of living in a different world; people have changed.' Bajada, Scheiber, and Mifsud hope that making these people and others aware of some of the alternatives will ignite the discussion around what Malta can look like in the future. Only then can we move away from car dependence towards a future with people at its heart! 



Superblocks Model
Image courtesy of Ajuntament de Barcelona

Further reading:
Dawra Madwarna. (2021).
Networks of Green Open
Space in Dense Urban Areas.
 Retrieved from https://issuu.com/dawramadwarna/docs/greenspacenetworks_summary_booklet